

The God question

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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring
religion through the worship of
God and the celebration of life; the
service of humanity and respect for
all creation; and the upholding of the
liberal Christian tradition."**

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Inquiring Words

PRAISING GOD

(*I Corinthians 13: 1-3*)

It's fun to stand around praising God with your like-minded friends – it's easy.

What isn't so easy is to really think about what you're doing, to ask if all that praising really means anything? Couldn't it just be a way of turning yourself on, a 'feelgood' drug – albeit a safer one than most?

And it isn't easy to really think about who or what you're praising. Is there anything there, apart from your own wishful thinking? Isn't all that praising really about not thinking?

But neither praising nor thinking mean anything without loving – which is what really matters.

Praising without loving is empty noise. Thinking without loving is soulless calculation. So let's praise God and think and love – but above all, love.

Now let's all take time to think about that, and praise God that we can!

– Cliff Reed

Strength in diversity

That old chestnut of whether belief in God is an essential part of being a Unitarian was brought to the fore again at our Annual Meetings, during the Opening Celebrations led by the British and Irish Unitarian Young Adult Network (BUYAN). They gave an uplifting and energising presentation of the concerns and activities of their group, without any mention of God. I put out a call to BUYAN members to share with me some of their thoughts on the God question, and reached out to some of our current and retired ministers for their thoughts also. The resulting articles provide a pretty good picture of the range of views within our national Beloved Community. We are, I think, stronger and richer for our great diversity.

Bill Darlison tantalisingly suggested that we don't have to settle for a straight choice between God or no God, but that we might embrace a third option. Frustratingly, he doesn't give any specifics about what that third option might be, and for that reason I have to disagree with him when he disparages agnosticism. I have wrestled hard with concepts of God over the years and have sometimes called myself an agnostic theist: God is deeply important to me, but I could not defend this stance intellectually. I very much resonate with the words of Simone Weil with which Bill ends his article.

I only noticed when I was gathering the articles together that all of the BUYAN articles were by women and all of the others by men. This was not intentional, but, in retrospect, maybe it speaks of my belief in the importance of fresh young women's voices in this discussion.

– Maud Robinson

BUYAN on God

What does the coming generation understand by the term 'God'? What is their experience, what are their hopes, and what are they looking for? Three members of the British and Irish Unitarian Young Adult Network share their thoughts...

My concept of God has grown out of personal experience, and throughout my life it has been a constant. One that when I am most connected feels like 'coming home' and hearing from somewhere very close by that 'you will never be lonely again' because of the depth of love it is possible to feel and receive when in this divine state. In the spaces between deep personal spiritual experience comes my connection to a community, living out my expression of divinity through action, activism and as much kindness as I can find. The sporadic moments of coming home feel like a gift and can't be induced, so I feel how I live my daily life should reflect the connection I believe we have to God, each other, the planet and the cosmos.

— Lizzie Harley



*'How I live my daily life
should reflect the connection
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each other, the planet
and the cosmos'*

God is of no importance to me. A supposedly omniscient, omnipotent presence that does not intervene in the events that happen in the world, but supposedly predetermines them, does not help me. I find no comfort in the idea of a 'God' and my spirituality is not nourished by praying to a force which may not exist. For me, there is no specific 'Ultimate'. There is no 'Higher Being'. For me that which is 'Ultimate' is ourselves and one another. I do not choose to be a Unitarian because of a belief in a 'God', but instead because of the sense of community, of spiritual nourishment, and a chance to continually better myself for the benefit of our community. Being part of this community is what I see as an 'Ultimate'. But in the way of a 'Higher Being', personally, the idea doesn't sit comfortably with me. You can disagree, I think that's OK. We're a non-conformist community and there are so many chapels within our franchise that no doubt we can find our spiritual place somewhere. We don't have to think alike to love alike. Within BUYAN we have come up with a hashtag for Unitarianism which is simply #inclusiveunitarians, because, essentially, that's our ethos.

Whether you believe in a God or not, whether you find comfort in your community or the idea of a white heaven and pearly gates, hey, we'll accept you. There's something for everyone. I was somewhat unsurprised to hear there was some disquiet surrounding the GA Opening Celebrations regarding the lack/little mention of a 'God'/'Ultimate'. The idea of the 'force' as mentioned in Stephen Lingwood's Zette article, in

(Continued on page 4)

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BUYAN on God

(Continued from page 3)

the opening reels in the OC, and within the entire StarWars saga lends itself to the idea of a ‘God’. The meditation in the Opening Celebrations I felt displayed a ‘God’-like sense of spirituality even though a ‘God’ was not explicitly mentioned. It was also noted that there are Unitarians who believe in an ‘Ultimate’, but for some of us (and not just those in BUYAN) a belief in a ‘Higher Power’ isn’t necessary to nurture their spirituality. It isn’t for me.

I’d like to note that I do not speak for BUYAN as a whole, but I do think that the Opening Celebrations nurtured spirituality and they did try to include everybody possible. To those who couldn’t find their ‘God’ during the Opening Celebrations, maybe they just weren’t looking hard enough...?

— Lizzy Rosenberg

I don’t have any great succinct expression of my faith except for this: I believe in God, as a presence in this world. This is why when Lizzy declared during the opening ceremony at GA (that I was part of) that they don’t believe in God and don’t feel it is necessary, and that religion is dying, it jarred with me. I don’t think religion is necessarily dying, rather I think that being part of any kind of organised group motivated by a belief or value – be that social, political or religious – is falling out of favour in the UK and Western Europe. Many people declare themselves to be ‘spiritual but not religious’ which I feel is a matter of wording and a desire to be seen as individual.

Lizzy’s declaration reminded me of when I was a undergraduate and a founder member of the Atheist Society at the height of Richard Dawkins’s popularity after the publication of *The God Delusion*. We thought we were the bee’s knees, intellectual know-it-alls free from religious faith, which on reflection is the typical arrogance of students, really. Then, not so long after, something happened which I could only term a religious experience, the overwhelming experience that God is part of this universe: a presence. It haunted me for some time, until I found the Unitarians and the space to spiritually develop in a place where I could use any inspirational source that resonated with me. If we are not a religious movement for seekers of the divine in all its forms then what are we for? A vague rag-bag of socially liberal values does not make for a strong foundation. The space we provide to be wide-reaching in our beliefs is our greatest strength, and we should be seeking to support each other in this wherever it leads us, including the space to let people declare they believe in God and not feeling like a dying breed because of it. God is something I feel, mostly as little more than a background hum that I can’t quite put my finger on, which occasionally bursts into a full-blown symphony which lifts my heart towards them. My life wouldn’t be the same without them.

— Kate Foggo



***‘God is something
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Meeting (the Symbol of) God again for the first time

It was the young man's wrestlings that set me off. Writing in *GAZette* (the daily newsletter produced at Unitarian Annual Meetings) he complained about the God-language most Unitarian adults seemed to use, which turned him off 'religion' and any sense of true spirituality. I found myself (patronisingly?) thinking: 'Been there; done that!' And feeling most sympathetic.

As a teenager intending a career in science, I had little time for what seemed like my mother's Unitarian religiosity, no time for any conception of 'the divine', no time for church. Though the wonder and mystery of an expanding universe had me in a certain thrall.

Life then delivered what one might call my first emotional shock, and things began to subtly change. My career in science came to seem like a dead end, and I found myself drawn towards the human sciences: sociology and psychology. Actively involved with the Unitarian youth movement of the day, I suppose I was subtly exposed to a measure of philosophical and theological thinking too, without realising it.

Then came *Honest to God* (in the same year sex was invented!), radical Bishop John Robinson's attempt, from his hospital bed, to set out what seemed really real in his life of faith, beyond the realist 'God of Theism'. Robinson explored, especially, Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity', Bultmann's suggested need for demythologisation when reading the biblical record, and – above all, for me – Tillich's notions of 'ultimate concern' and 'ground of being'. 'God is not a Daddy in the Sky!' screamed the *Sunday Express*. In the Essex Hall Bookshop, where I was working, we could hardly keep up with the sale of copies to ordinary folk you would not dream had an interest in a theological book! If memory serves, the author himself came in to thank us.

For me, the change was never a case of a sudden event, but a drip, drip of new understanding, in which Tillich's sermon collection, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, played a significant part. Over the decades since, I have been able to lay hold once again on many of the Symbols of Faith; to meet 'the divine' again for the first time.

I wonder if this is a process which every generation has to go through (or tragically, get stuck in at some point!), perhaps finding new expressive words, new symbols? The writer in *GAZette* mentions the safe space contemporary Unitarian youth activity has been able to create, where genuine – and likely lifelong – supportive friendships have emerged, and the sharing therein of a sustaining spiritual life.

The writer complains that it seems as if our young people are not seen as the future they clearly are. This prompts the question 'what would be happening if they were?!' So, the 'adults' come across as 'fat cats & big cheeses', do they? If only! Such epithets should surely be reserved for the world of business and commerce, where the cap most surely fits! The 'adults' are fellow Unitarians, as much struggling along their developing spiritual path as 'youth' is. However, it would appear that channels of dialogue very much need to be opened.

Maybe we 'adults' should watch our mouths more, and the 'young people' should ask just what it is they are reacting against.

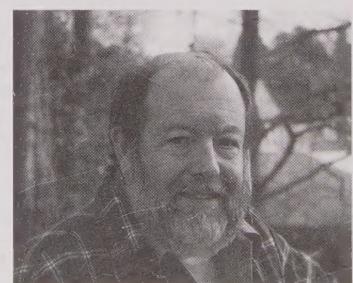
This young person feels 'our non-traditional views are seen as fancies' to be outgrown! That is sad, and I wouldn't want to be counted among such so-called 'adults'; but by contrast I offer my own experience that one does move on spiritually, and the process doesn't stop when youth seems long left behind!

The *GAZette* author states '... the whole youth movement was about exploring spirituality ... one's connection with each other and the love that we share as a species, and God wasn't mentioned'. I would suggest you weren't exploring anything else! (Hush my mouth!). In the 'old language' this might be considered the equivalent to the Unitarian College Manchester motto: *Ubi spiritus domini, ibi libertas* (Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty).

Maybe the Quakers are right in suggesting that the word 'God' be dropped from their worship, as it is too tied to outmoded notions. Yet, it will be interesting to see what the alternative is to their notion that 'there is that of God in everyone'. I confess I tend to use the word sparingly, not least in prayers, preferring something like 'Eternal Spirit of Life and Love'.

I sometimes wonder just how abreast with today's theological thinking Unitarians are. How many of us hold on to the God of Theism? (see Sue Woolley's recent survey). I certainly welcome the initiative of the Theological Conferences held in recent years. We do have the Sea of Faith set-up, which some Unitarians espouse; for me that leans too far in the direction of 'religion is just a human construction'. However, if push comes to shove, my 'God' nowadays has more in common with Richard Dawkins's 'magic of reality', than the postmodernists' 'any myth will do' perspective!

So where are our differences, young and old? Let's talk! It's good to talk, seeking to be 'inclusive and representative' and 'respect[ing] everyone equally no matter what'. However, that does not mean, 'in the light of reason and conscience', necessarily rating all views as of equal value. Unitarianism does not actually imply you can 'believe what you like' (see Philip Hewett's *An Unfettered Faith*). I wonder why 'piety' and 'deity' – as perceived – are such turn-offs? God knows, the last thing anyone would want to do is deliberately drive young people away!



The Rev Ernest Baker is a retired Unitarian minister.

Good with God ...

For some Unitarians ‘God is the goodness in all of us’, and for others ‘God is everything’, but for the Rev Ant Howe it is important to affirm that ‘God is someone’.

Stephen Lingwood recently wrote on his blog, ‘I think I have come up with a definition of God that is incredibly simple, and yet pretty much says everything I want to say about God: God is Everything and God is Someone.’

As I read Stephen’s post I found myself delighted and excited that a theology so close to my own could be so succinctly stated. If I am honest, I was also a little envious that I didn’t think of stating it like that first!

I could imagine us at Kingswood finishing our services by enthusiastically shouting Stephen’s phrase ‘God is Everything and God is Someone’, though the vacancy for an end-of-service piece has already been filled with some words of Covenant:

Love is the doctrine of this church,
the quest for truth is its sacrament,
and service is its prayer;
To dwell together in peace,
to seek knowledge in freedom,
to serve humankind in fellowship,
to the end that all souls shall grow
into harmony with the divine:
This do we covenant with each other
and our God.

These words of Covenant are recited at Kingswood each Sunday at the end of our Service and they are cherished by the congregation.

Within this Covenant we make promises to each other, but we also include God in our promise. There is a recognition in this promise that God requires something of us, and that it isn’t enough just to worship: faith and works must go together.

I would describe our congregation as ‘God-centred’, but when I say that I do not suggest that every person shares exactly the same beliefs. Some members of our congregation have a definite belief in a God who loves them and who walks with them. Perhaps the majority of our congregation acknowledge Jesus as the central figure in their religious journey, and as the person who reveals God to them. Others relate more to the idea of a creative force, a loving influence, or a mysterious presence.

As a church with a Covenant rather than a creed, we do not limit who or what God might be – each must find God in their own way. However, we do think that we provide a loving environment where people can do this.

Many in our congregation tell of how they had previously rejected the notion of God, but now have embraced God anew after finding a loving spiritual community which gave them the freedom to explore their beliefs.

Perhaps one of the most poignant parts of our service each Sunday is when we unite in silent prayer. It is a time when no words are needed; each person is reaching out to that which

they hold to be Divine, but are doing so within a community.

Maybe ‘God-centred and people-centred’ is a better description for us. We are very conscious that within our local community there are many who regard Kingswood as ‘their church’ even though they wouldn’t describe themselves as religious. We try our best to be there for them.

My own faith journey led me from a firm belief in an all-powerful God, to a healthy agnosticism when I first came to Unitarianism. When I first entered ministry I used to use phrases like ‘God is the goodness in all of us’, but now I find such phrases lacking – possibly because they address ‘God being Everything’ but not ‘God being Someone’.

I need the Everything: being open to different ideas and theologies, and honouring those religious journeys different to my own.

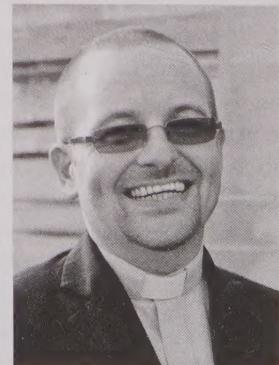
But I also need the Someone: the Someone whom I love, worship, rail against, fall out with, yet fall back in love with again and again.

One of my favourite hymns begins with the line ‘We limit not the truth of God’ and, for me, that is what is precious about our gathering on a Sunday at Kingswood. Each person is bringing their understanding, insight and experience to our worship.

Perhaps the majority of our congregation acknowledge Jesus as the central figure in their religious journey

Kingswood is a church where, for 310 years now, people have gathered for the worship of God. We are proud to continue in the Unitarian tradition of celebrating the Oneness of God.

There are many ways to be a Unitarian. Some years ago, Dawn Buckle talked about a ‘Unitarian patchwork’. I rejoice at the diversity of our congregations. Moreover, I thank God for them and for those in our movement whose religious experience is different to mine.



The Rev Ant Howe is minister with Kingswood Unitarians, Birmingham.

... or good without God

Among the New Unity congregation the word ‘God’ is rarely spoken, writes the Rev Andy Pakula. There love and justice are essential aspects of faith, but belief in God is not.

On a typical Sunday morning, 75 adults and children arrive at the door of the Newington Green Meeting House in London to attend the weekly Sunday Gathering. In this place of worship built in 1708, the young, diverse people who nearly fill the pews come to refocus on what is most important in life, to be spurred on to greater action to make a better world, to raise children with a commitment to compassion and acceptance, to laugh, and to love one another.

In many ways, New Unity’s Sunday Gatherings are traditional. In the Meeting House – one of the two buildings owned by New Unity – the attendees sing hymns, listen to readings, hear a sermon, watch as a child lights the flame of a chalice, and attend to one another’s joys and sorrows.

New Unity is, according to General Assembly figures, the largest congregation in the British Unitarian movement. It is heavily involved in social activism, has a vibrant children’s programme, is deeply connected with the larger community, and runs a wide range of programmes and events.

Although God is not at the centre, all beliefs are welcome at New Unity as long as they do not conflict with the radically inclusive nature of the community and its commitment to love and justice

New Unity is also a place where the word ‘God’ is rarely spoken, where people are never asked to pray, and where the congregants know and approve of the fact that their minister considers himself to be an atheist.

A church without a focus on God is an unusual thing in our movement. It is historically rare. It has been the subject of considerable criticism and disparagement from some parts of the movement. New Unity has been accused of pandering to the masses, of watering down Unitarianism, and of abandoning the essence of the movement.

These critiques are grounded in an assumption that belief in and engagement with a supernatural entity referred to as God is at the very heart of Unitarianism. This contention is debatable. Unitarianism grew and developed as part of theistic Christianity, but it is non-creedal and has evolved considerably over the centuries. Many members of British Unitarian congregations are non-theists, and non-theistic humanists have made up a large portion of American Unitarians for about a century. The place of non-theism in British Unitarianism remains a live and often heated issue.

The question of what is at the heart of the movement or, given our democratic tradition, at the heart of any congregation is a crucial question to ask. If the essence of

Unitarianism is belief in and engagement with God, then the critics are correct and New Unity is not true to our movement.

Each Sunday at New Unity, the congregation is welcomed to a ‘radically inclusive community of love and justice’. This refers to New Unity’s essence and its purpose. We work to grow love and justice in individual hearts, in community, and in the larger world. We know that love is the only force strong enough to cast out hatred. We know that justice is essential for a world where everyone can grow to be their best selves. We know that, as Cornel West put it, ‘Justice is what love looks like in public.’

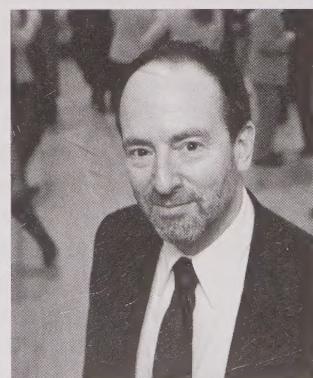
How can we best pursue this mission? A small proportion of the residents of the United Kingdom would say they believe in God; an even smaller fraction of the population attend any religious community or services regularly. The word ‘religious’ itself has become repellent to many. To grow love and justice broadly, our efforts are greatly hindered if we can only engage with that small minority of the population that have an affinity for religion, church, and belief in God. Changing the national culture to fit our congregations is not feasible. Unitarian congregations must therefore either be willing to change or content themselves with reaching only a small minority of the millions of people they could benefit.

Many – if not most – Unitarian congregations, when faced with this dilemma, conclude that they cannot change enough to suit the people they hope to reach. They conclude that the language of traditional religion and worship of God is part of the essence of their faith.

New Unity chooses to change. We hold that love and justice are the essential aspects of our faith and that belief in God is not. Although God is not at the centre, all beliefs are welcome at New Unity as long as they do not conflict with the radically inclusive nature of the community and its commitment to love and justice.

In the New Testament book of Matthew, Chapter 7, Jesus of Nazareth says, ‘By their fruits you will know them.’ A bad tree, he asserts, cannot bear good fruit. New Unity has borne and continues to bear the good fruits of growth, care, kindness, helping, love and justice. We hope that our Unitarian brothers and sisters will judge this tree by its fruit.

The Rev Andy Pakula is minister with New Unity Unitarians, North London.



Or ... 'the third option'?

'The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.'

Nils Bohr

It has recently been reported that Quakers in Britain are thinking of dropping 'God' from their statement of principles. Fourteen per cent are atheists, and 43 per cent say they are uncomfortable with the word 'God'. We Unitarians, who have been called 'Quakers with hymns', have been expressing our discomfort with the word 'God' for the thirty or so years that I have been a member, and probably for a few decades before that. When I lived in America, I attended services in four Unitarian places of worship, and God was rarely mentioned, in sermons, readings or even in what purported to be prayers.

But there is a change afoot in Britain. There's a growing interest in theology among some Unitarians, and conferences concerned with theology were held in 2016 and 2017, and a third may follow this year.

This unexpected and, to me, very welcome interest in theology prompted me to look back over the 'God' sermons I gave during the fourteen years that I was minister in Dublin and to collect them into a little book which I have called *Struggling with God*, and which I hope will be available soon.

One of the pieces in the book is based on a short article which the journalist, Fred Sedgwick, wrote in *The Guardian* some years ago, called 'Why I love my cat'. This article got me thinking about the nature of belief. Here is part of Fred's article:

There are the obvious reasons (why I love my cat) of course: the delicate marmalade-coloured fur on his feet and belly, the utter reliability of his cupboard love, the joy he gave me once when he caused my mild wife to say, 'Get down you buggering little sod' as he trotted across the fish lasagne she had just prepared.

But the main reason is his endearing stupidity. Some cats are clever, and one owner I know claims that her favourite has not only worked out how to open the fridge to get at her food but has also declined to teach this trick to the other cats in the house.

However, my cat is stupid. He exhibits this best in the rain. He pushes his way through the cat flap at the back of the house, gets his nose wet, and returns immediately. But now his eyes plead with me to open the front door – on the grounds that, although it is raining out the back, it may be dry at the front.

The Guardian, 6 September 2004

A little picture of Fred's cat accompanied the article and, although I don't claim to be an expert in these matters, he looked intelligent to me. His name is Stanley, too, which elevates him immeasurably above those of his feline brothers and sisters who go by such demeaning names as Tiddles and Puss, and I agree with Fred: he has a lot to teach us. But what looks like stupidity to Fred could be interpreted as the most amazing perspicacity. Stanley Sedgwick refuses to be cowed by convention; he holds out strongly against the tyranny of tradition. The fact that it's raining at the back probably does mean that it's raining at the front, but it may not be, and those of us who have stood, dry, on one side of the street watching the rain pour down on the other – an experience which most of us have at least once in a lifetime – will have to agree with Stanley Sedgwick that choices in life do not always fall neatly into simple categories of either/or. 'It's either raining or it's not raining' may be a good enough rule of thumb for day-to-day activities, but there are occasions – rare though they may be – on which we must be prepared to consider the third option, that it is both raining and not raining at the same time.

We Unitarians, who have been called 'Quakers with hymns', have been expressing our discomfort with the word 'God' for the thirty or so years that I have been a member, and probably for a few decades before that

The problem with our education and, in many ways, the problem with our religion, is that we are rarely alerted to these third options. We are taught to think in simple alternatives – good or bad, black or white, true or false – but the world is maddeningly perverse, refusing to comply with our comfortable categories. GK Chesterton said, many years ago, that if a creature from outer space were to examine a human being, he would find two ears, two eyes, two arms, two legs, and two kidneys, and just when he thought he had discovered the immutable law of human composition, he would come across the heart and need to reformulate his hypothesis.

Science – when it is good science – proceeds by means of a constant reformulation of hypotheses, an acknowledgement that our conclusions are tentative and that something new, something wildly improbable, may come along and alter our thinking. At a conference held in 2004, Stephen Hawking, the renowned author of *A Brief History of Time*, admitted that his previous ideas about black holes had been wrong, and that further consideration of the evidence had obliged him to modify his theory. Hawking was aware – as anyone who has even the slightest familiarity with cosmology and particle physics must be aware – that the universe is a strange place indeed, and that we will not be able to penetrate that

strangeness unless we are prepared to lift ourselves out of those familiar grooves of thought into which habit, lethargy, and arrogance have taken us. The physical universe is as perplexing to the scientist as meteorology is to Fred Sedgwick's cat. Despite – even because of – centuries of meticulous exploration, we are realising that our quest for understanding is barely in its infancy, and that prudence demands that we draw our conclusions lightly.

Nowhere is the human addiction to familiar ways of thinking more in evidence than in religion, and nowhere is it more restricting. We've thought ourselves into a hopeless series of either/or predicaments where neither option seems acceptable, but no other option seems available.

Simone Weil wrote: 'I am sure there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion; I am quite sure there is no God in the sense that I am aware that there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say the word'

Some years ago, I gave a sermon in which I rather flippantly declared that atheism is just a failure of the imagination. I could just as well have said that theism – belief in a rather benign father-figure up in the sky – is a failure of the imagination, too. In fact, neither position seems entirely satisfactory to me. The British philosopher John Gray says in his book *Heresies* that atheism is just a Victorian fossil, and I would be inclined to add that traditional belief is an even older historical curio. Agnosticism belongs in the dustbin of intellectual history, too. An agnostic is happy enough with the alternatives, he just hasn't decided which one to go for. It's the third option, which transcends the other two, which appeals to me.

I was pondering these rather intriguing and perplexing matters, intending to write a sermon about them called The Third Option, when, out of the blue, completely unsolicited, a book arrived in the post. It was *The Story of My Heart*, by Richard Jefferies, who died in 1887 aged 39, and of whom I had never heard. It was sent to me by Irene Hornby, a deeply spiritual woman, who edited the Unitarian Psychical Society's journal. 'I have taken the liberty of sending you the enclosed book,' wrote Irene in an accompanying letter. 'I think you would appreciate Richard Jefferies' writings. He saw the wonder and the glory of things. Please forgive my presumption of its appeal to you – I had two copies and I thought you might be a sympathetic reader.'

Irene and I had been friends for a good few years and she knew the sort of stuff that might interest me. What she couldn't have known was that Richard Jefferies' book would express, in the most lucid prose, the very ideas that had been swirling in an inchoate jumble in my head for a couple of weeks. I don't know how to explain this, but I am no stranger to the phenomenon. All I know is that I needed to read this book at the very time it came into my possession, but I am also aware that the conventional categories of explanation that are available to me just don't seem adequate. Was it

coincidence? Angels? Synchronicity? Chance? Divine inspiration? Telepathy? Who knows? It could be all of these, or a combination of some of them, or something which transcends them all and defeats our present powers of comprehension. What is not legitimate, in my view, is the denial of the phenomenon based on some convenient dogma derived from materialist presuppositions that these things cannot possibly occur.

This is part of what Richard Jefferies says:

From standing face to face so long with the real earth, the real sun, and the real sea, I am firmly convinced that there is an immense range of thought quite unknown to us yet ... The problem of my own existence also convinces me there is much more. As our ideas have run in circles for centuries, it is difficult to find words to express the idea that there are other ideas. For myself, though I cannot fully express myself, I feel fully convinced that there is a vast immensity of thought, of existence, and of other things beyond even immortal existence.

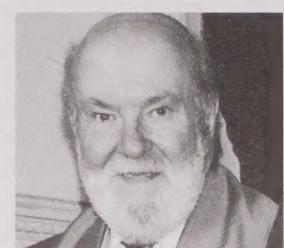
The Story of my Heart, Richard Jefferies

I agree with Richard Jefferies. Decades of intellectual endeavour have brought me to a perplexed (and amused) state of ignorance. A lifetime of looking for answers has made me realise that we've barely even started to formulate the questions adequately. You probably feel the same way. I hope you do. If so, my advice, for what it's worth, is this: when faced with unsatisfactory alternatives, look for a third option (maybe we should be called 'The Church of the Third Option!'); remember that it is occasionally possible for it to be raining and not raining at the same time. Remember the quotation from Nils Bohr with which we began: 'The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement; but the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.'

My advice is this: when faced with unsatisfactory alternatives, look for a third option

The French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil was aware of this paradox. She wrote, 'There is a God, there is no God. I am sure there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion; I am quite sure there is no God in the sense that I am aware that there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say the word.'

Maybe the atheist and the believer are both right and both wrong, and, in the light of this intriguing possibility, we should be very careful about the labels we put on ourselves.



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Rekindling the spirit of community – part two

This is the second of three instalments of the John Relly Beard lecture 2018, delivered by Matt Carmichael

Our society faces serious problems. Political turmoil sweeps the rich world as voters desert the status quo. We have manufactured new, existential threats – from diseases that evolve resistance to medicines, through runaway climate change, to nuclear holocaust. Perhaps mental ill-health is now simply normal. It seems almost impossible to find inner peace.

Community is in crisis, its fire dim. To rekindle it, we must understand what smothered it. I don't believe in some bygone golden era, but I do believe 500 years of what has been labelled 'modernism' have undermined the three pillars of community, so I find this a helpful perspective. Modernism starts with the flowering of learning at the medieval period that produced the birth of science. The benefits are well rehearsed and my purpose is not to belittle them: just one of them – anaesthetics – made surgery possible. It gave my mum new hips and my dad an arterial stent.

Medieval Europeans understood nature as both living and sacred. The *anima mundi* – the world soul – gave Earth life. But early modernists desacralised nature, commodifying the Earth and paving the way for its exploitation. Historian of science Peter Bowler writes, 'The new commercial empires began to demand an ideology that presented Nature only as a material system to be exploited. If people were to feel comfortable when they used the earth for their own selfish ends... nature had to be despiritualised.' Robert Boyle, pioneer of the 17th-century Scientific Revolution, was explicit: 'The veneration wherewith men are imbued for what they call nature has been a discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God.' Then came the revolution in philosophy pioneered by René Descartes, a mathematician who interpreted the whole universe as a dead mechanism, a complex clock. He advocated nailing live dogs to boards for vivisection lectures, saying their howls and whimpers were as devoid of feeling as the air pumped through a church organ. This machine metaphor goes to the heart of our civilisation, and as the contemporary philosopher Mary Midgley says, 'Despite many reformers, Descartes still rules.'

This process of taking the soul out of nature rendered non-human life dead and cut the human world off from the rest of nature. For the powerful, this went hand in hand with the moral licence offered by Francis Bacon, the first to articulate the scientific method. To him the subjugation of nature was our divine calling, the fulfilment of the biblical command to 'fill the earth and subdue it'. Bacon sought to re-engineer the whole Earth, to create a new Eden. Only this Eden was not a garden, it was the attainment of absolute power, the 'empire of man' referred to by Boyle.

So that gave licence to the series of enclosures that followed. Common land was taken by the rich for economic gain, freshly justified by modernism's moral purpose. The trickle of peasants kicked off their lands accelerated, and by the time Darwin began to reintegrate humanity with the living world, half of England's population lived in cities, physically removed from the land. Those who owned a stake in the industrial project were on course to reap huge economic benefits from our exploitation of life on Earth. Across the globe, the British Empire expanded using military technologies born of the modernist vision, to enclose entire nations. Modernism consciously assaulted our human connection to soil.

In this vision, what is a human being? Descartes reduced the universe to a giant engineering project by a deity he called a clockmaker, the 17th-century equivalent of a high-tech engineer. Not a father, a mother, a friend or lover, but a technician. Humans were all part of the mechanics, but the clockmaker God had endowed us with a little of his own intelligence, with a soul. This 'ghost in the machine' elevated humanity above dead nature, including by surviving the body's death. It's a mind rather than a heart, as in Descartes' famous slogan, 'I think therefore I am'.

Why 'I think'? Why not 'I feel', as Rousseau would have it 200 years later? Well, the modernist project was born out of the rediscovery in the 13th century of the classical texts. Central to these was Greek rationalism in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The power of reason, especially when allied to the empirical evidence of the senses, proved in science and technology, marginalised other ways of knowing. Even theologians treated logic and reason as the final word in Truth. One effect was that Reformation thinkers dared to question religious dogma, but soon thinkers like Voltaire reasoned God out of the picture altogether, excluding heart knowledge, creating enclosures in the realms of the soul. In the 20th century AJ Ayer's positivist philosophy confidently dismissed ethics and metaphysics as 'literally senseless'. As a professor of divinity at Edinburgh University is reputed to have told his students at the start of term, "There is only one way to spell mysticism in this faculty, and it begins M-I-S-T!"

In the 20th century, Carl Jung called for a rebalancing of the four ways of knowing our human endowment: thinking, feeling, intuiting and sensing. He and his mentor, Freud, encountered rationality's enclosures of the soul in the extreme neuroses of their bourgeois clients – people taught not to feel emotion, not to indulge the senses and not to trust their intuitions, with disastrous personal and social consequences. True to Descartes's vision, the soul had been reduced to the calculating mind.

With such logic, society was remoulded by the modernist project. The rational notion of individual rights laid the foundations for democracy, the law as we know it, and eventually feminism. But as Jung would say: the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The individual who deserved these rights was an isolated will-o'-the-wisp of rational mind peering out from a robotic body, never quite certain that anything outside itself was entirely real. Therefore, one was motivated

increasingly by nothing but self-interest. Laying the foundations of modernist economic theory, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* says, ‘It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.’ Later, John Stuart Mill, father of utilitarianism, was to sketch the outlines of homo economicus – economic man, a rational agent who calculated what was in his own interests in ceaseless assessments of the potential for profit versus loss. These moral philosophers perhaps did not intend their ‘economic man’ as a model of the whole person. Nonetheless, as economies were moulded around their principles, people inevitably conformed to them. Corporate bosses excluded every other factor but profit from their bottom lines, and had this cutthroat ethic carved into policy. These could be the enclosures of motivation, marginalising every other value and externalising the costs of production so that consumers do not pay the retail cost of people of losing their land, livelihoods and lives. Status came to be symbolised by splendid isolation in a top-floor office, a fast car, a detached house. For Jean-Paul Sartre, hell was other people. For Ayn Rand, the darling of American economists and business leaders like Alan Greenspan, Rex Tillerson and Donald J Trump, everyone gets just what they deserve through the implacable logic of homo economicus. It may not have been exactly what she meant, but when Margaret Thatcher said, ‘There is no such thing as society,’ it encapsulated the zeitgeist that has defined the last 30 years of globalisation.

Soil, soul, society – the basic human needs that animate the spirit of community – have been neglected and suppressed by modernism’s shortcomings.

This violation of what it means to be human has resulted in consumerism, otherwise known as Shopping. Earth’s life systems are destroyed to feed surrogate desires concocted to mask the real needs the system starves us of. In place of communion with nature we are offered gym membership and organic supermarket carrots. In place of spirituality in the service of life, we worship status and money. Soul music, rooted in gospel and blues, is repackaged by marketing departments and sold back to the next generation in the form of misogynistic gangsta R’n’B. In place of real human connection, the season ticket, the football tactics discussion, and internet porn.

These are surrogates, so they never bring fulfilment. They can’t. It’s like trying to live on sugar. And when there is no such thing as enough, violence is endemic.

It’s hardly a new idea. In his greatest work, *The Republic*, Plato has his mentor, Socrates, hanging around with the young aristocrats of Athens, discussing the ideal city and the human qualities, the virtues, needed for it to function. Socrates describes a community where folk live a simple, fulfilling life in harmony with nature. He warns, ‘Ambition and love of money are ... something to be ashamed of’ and says the test of right livelihood is whether people ‘leave their children to live as they have done’.

But Glaucon, the hothead, argues for a life of outrageous and increasing luxury, generation after generation. Socrates takes the idea seriously, and draws out its contradictions through his trademark questioning.

‘Then ... the land which was sufficient to support the last generation will be insufficient to support the next?’

‘Yes,’ says Glaucon.

‘Then we must take a slice from our neighbours’ territory. And they will want to do the same to ours, if they overpass the bounds of necessity and plunge into the reckless pursuit of wealth?’

‘Yes, that must happen,’ says Glaucon.

‘So shall we go to war at that point, Glaucon, or what will happen?’

‘We shall go to war,’ he says.

‘And we need not say at present whether the effects of war are good or bad, let us only notice that we have found the origins of war in the passion for luxury.’

‘Agreed,’ says Glaucon.

‘Then, my friend, our city will need to be greater still and by a whole army. It will defend all the wealth we have described, and will march out and fight the invaders.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then, Glaucon, with such natures as these, how are people to be prevented from behaving savagely towards other citizens?’

‘By Zeus,’ admits Glaucon, ‘that will not be easy.’

Here, at the birth of the philosophical tradition in the West, our modern predicament is laid bare in a few paragraphs: the materialism by which any of us exceeds our share of natural or social resources, relies on a violent struggle for land and labour from which all wealth flows – and this in turn corrupts the character, the soul, of citizens.

From Hollywood to foreign policy, killing is represented as the solution to every ill: the sheriff cleans up the town; the vigilante teaches the bad guys a lesson; war spreads democracy.

It’s no abstract idea. People are on the end of this violence. Your mobile phone, and mine, relies on an element called tantalum. It is mined by some of the poorest people in the world, including children as young as five. There’s a good chance that the tantalum in your phone was bought from sponsors of the Second Congo War and its aftermath, which killed 5.4 million people.

Violence at home is perhaps better hidden. The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority estimates that at any one time there are 300,000 slaves working in Britain.

Neither is the violence always so explicit. What about the violence of overwork that deprives children of their parents? Or the violence of compound interest that robs and enslaves through debt? Or the corporate violence by which employees do for money or promotion to strangers what they would never dream of doing to friends, becoming the executives saying, ‘It can’t be helped’?

The violence in which we participate as consumers is poisonous to our souls, and none of us who attends the Unitarian meetings in a countryside hotel is in a position to judge. Even if someone among us were, judgement is always a distancing, an alienation. Is it not a form of vengeance? If so, we can only expect it to perpetuate the violence we hate. We judge the indifference of another to suffering, saying, ‘How can you not care?’ but the effect of our judging is much the same: both indifference and judgement dull the ache of the cauterised heart. The challenge is to open up to the painful awareness of our part in the violence and allow ourselves to begin the journey of transformation. The heart connects not by attaining moral superiority, but by a quality of open honesty. This is how love germinates. I don’t believe we can simply choose to love as though doing so were an act of will. But we can make the effort to be honest in our relationships – a psychological honesty that goes deeper than truth-telling and aspires to the truth that sets us free.

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The gentle art of belonging

At the recent minister's conference we were asked to take part in an exercise that invited us to explore belonging; to ask ourselves where in the world we belong. We were asked to consider where we would like to be buried or have our ashes scattered. Some of my colleagues had no trouble with this question, while others struggled. I was one of the strugglers. I initially thought to myself, 'I'm too young to think about such things,' but I soon got over myself and began to struggle with what I would want to happen to my remains, as I felt belonged to more than one place and one group of people. It was interesting to listen to what others shared. I felt relieved when I heard one or two others wanted to divide their ashes, because I knew I would have to do the same. I decided I would initially split mine in half, then split one of those halves in half again. One quarter would be with my dad and grandparents, in the cemetery at Bruntcliffe, Morley, and the other quarter with my mum's family grave in Batley, where my maternal grandparents are. I left the second half open as I hope I have another half of life yet to live and who knows to where and with whom I will belong by then. That second half of my 'dash' of loving and belonging is yet to be lived.

This fascinating exercise made me think about who exactly I belong to and what it is that makes me who I am. No one lives completely by themselves – we all belong to other people in so many ways. Yes, we belong to ourselves, but also to one another.

The other morning, in my meditation group, I was listening to a Jewish friend whose daughter is about to get married. It is going to be a huge wedding and the whole family are travelling to Israel for four days of celebration. My friend had recently been back to Leeds, where he grew up, with his other daughter. They visited the cemetery where his parents and sister are buried. In keeping with the traditions of their religion they were inviting the spirit of their dead relatives to accompany them to the wedding. It was a deeply emotional thing for my friend to do, as the death of his sister, at a young age, had affected him deeply. He told me he left a stone at the grave – again part of the tradition – and noticed that other relatives must have visited recently as there were many other stones. I can see how important this ritual was for him as he and his family move forward. Ritual is so important in life, yet it is diminishing in recent times. I see more and more how vital it is to my life and the lives of others as we move through life's many transitions.

I've been thinking a lot about belonging in recent times: the people who have made me who I am, who have influenced my life, and the people whose lives I have touched. I have entered into someone else's life and family in recent months as my relationship with Sue has blossomed. I recently spent a day with her siblings and other family members. I didn't find it too much of a challenge, actually. They have been very welcoming. I suspect that the reason I have been at ease is because I do belong in my own being. I can be myself in the company of others; I don't need to try to fit into the lives of others and fall for the trap of false belonging.

Sadly many people don't feel they belong. Some of this can be an inner sense of rejection, but not wholly; some people do feel that they cannot be themselves fully and thus



From nothing to everything

By *Danny Crosby*

do not always belong. Sadly some people and places do not always welcome or invite everyone to come as they are.

How do we help a person to belong? It begins with welcome, to say, 'Come exactly as you are.' This, though, is not always easy. Identity and how people identify themselves can be complicated. This has become particularly apparent around gender in recent times. I know I've got it wrong on occasion – I hope I haven't hurt anyone in my clumsiness. I am trying, but there is room for improvement.

I do not want to exclude anyone from my circle of love, and want everyone to feel that are accepted in my company; that they belong. Certainly, as a minister, I want people to feel that they can truly be who they are in the communities I serve. I truly want all to feel that they can come as they are and that no aspect of their humanity will be rejected. I don't want anyone to feel they need to fit into some ideal – whether it be age, gender identity, sexuality, politics, belief or lack of belief – and that in order to belong they have to do so falsely.

To belong means that you are accepted for who you are wholly, not partially; whereas fitting in means that you change who you are in some way in order to be accepted. Belonging is really about being loved without condition. This is the love that Jesus speaks of in the Gospels. This is the perfect love that is spoken of in Matthew's Gospel, from the Sermon on the Mount. 'Therefore be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.' I actually think that this is the only thing that we can do perfectly. I am striving for this every day. Perfect love is about welcoming one another exactly as we are, warts and all, and beauty spots too.

I believe that the primary purpose of my free religious tradition, of the communities I serve, is to create an environment where people can find their true belonging. My role as a minister is to create an environment where individuals can truly become who they are and share that with each other. Yes, each individual is unique, but each can only truly become who they are in community with others. No one belongs wholly to themselves. No one is an island. From the day we are born we are part of families and communities. These can be oppressive and inhibiting, or liberating and life-enhancing, and can give us the environment to truly become who we are, all that we were born to be, without apology; where we can practise perfect love for ourselves, for one another, for God and all life. This is Beloved Community, a space where you can become all that you are, in community with others.

By coming as we are and being all that we are, without apology, we belong authentically, not falsely. Therefore, I believe, our task is to find the courage to come as we are, exactly as we are, and to let our light shine on one another and thus invite others to do the same.

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